The Application Bridge: A Model for Improving Trainee Engagement in the Training Process

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The goal of this paper is to suggest a model for engaging trainees in the intellectual or mental activity necessary for training to be effective. Often, managers/trainees leave training sessions feeling that there was "too much theory." The application bridge provides the vehicle for the trainee to understand the role of theory and the trainee's responsibility to make theory useful in the training process. The application bridge overcomes a major problem in making training effective.

"It was good, but it contained too much theory" is a common complaint of many managers upon their return from a training or development seminar. While in many instances, this may be true; in just as many other instances, it is an unjustified criticism leveled at the trainer. What many managers/trainees do not appreciate is the necessity for training materials to be based on solid empirical research results and evidence of support for the underlying theoretical formulations that form the basis for the training (Cameron & Whetten, 1983; Porras & Anderson, 1981). This has been referred to variously as the "intellectual" or "cognitive" or "concept" component as opposed to the behavioral or skill component of development activities (Bandura, 1977; Porras & Anderson, 1981). Without inclusion of the cognitive component, trainers run the risk of trainees perceiving that their own implicit theories of management are widely accepted. Training content might then be interpreted through the lense of each trainee's common sense. Even one of the most popular (management) skill development textbooks, i.e. Whetten and Cameron's Developing Management Skills (2007), calls for techniques and skills based on social science and business research. On one page (p. 5) alone in the introduction of the text, Whetten and Cameron (2007) mention the need for a foundation of scholarly evidence no less than three times. Thus, the inclusion of some theory in training content is widely accepted by academics, consultants, and trainers.

Coverage of theory can help trainees to develop a framework for understanding and applying the training concepts to other situations that may be similar but not exactly the same as those presented in the training session. To facilitate the acceptance and appreciation of theory in training, trainers could find it helpful to explain the purpose of theory in training to trainees via the use of the "Application Bridge" concept. The Application Bridge can be used to clarify the roles of trainer and trainee in the training and development process, thus resulting in better outcomes from the training dollars spent in the organization.

The Participant/Trainee's Complaint

In designing, packaging, and conducting managerial training programs for large and

small as well as manufacturing and service organizations, the typical and most often voiced complaint is that the training is "not useful" because it is not directly applicable to the participant's "real world." When participants are asked what they expect from training, they typically respond with: I want personalized training that may be applied to my specific and (in their view) unique situation. Trainees are saying that general training and knowledge of general principles are of little or no value to them. They want training that is directly transferable from the training seminar to the job without thought or effort on their part.

What Training Departments Do

An examination of the outcomes of management development programs conducted by many organizations reveals that managers/trainees going through those programs often are unable to transfer the training to the work environment (Boyatzis, Leonard, Rhee, & Wheeler, 1996). Also, training departments' objectives are often to design and provide training that is appropriate for a class of problems faced by a group of managers. The typical training program provides general clues and guides about how to analyze a situation and then select the decision or course of action that is most appropriate, given the variety of inputs or contingencies impacting on the situation. Therefore, the training may not be directly transferable from the seminar to the job but instead must be adapted to fit the particular manager's situation.

The Basic Problem

In reality then, the basic problem that is one source of disagreement is the manager's desire for personalized training and the trainer's need to design training that is appropriate for a group of managers to deal with a general class of problems. To the extent that this disagreement persists, the effectiveness of training is reduced because expectations are not met.

Certainly, one way to relieve the source of disagreement is for training to provide the personalized training desired by the manager. This gives rise to the question of why this approach to training is not followed. The answer is simple—it is not economical. To provide the personalized type of training desired by the manager requires the trainer: 1. be thoroughly familiar with the manager's activities; 2. be intimately familiar with the manager's subordinates and superiors; 3. know all the intricacies of the manager's responsibilities, both formal and informal; 4. know the manager's background and range of experience; 5. know the manager's personality, leadership style, and decision making process; and 6. know the off-work environment that might affect the manager's work performance. This is described as one-on-one training or what might be called tutoring or coaching or mentoring. Fulfilling the above six steps is impossible and impractical and perhaps even invasive in the manager's life. However, the deterrent of primary consequence for most firms is that they cannot economically justify the training expenditure required to provide personalized one-on-one training for individual managers.

Given the above-described situation, it is doubtful that the manager's desire for highly

personalized one-on-one training will ever be met. What, then, can be done to explain the role of training and, furthermore, to bring the managers/trainees' and trainers' expectations closer together so that training effectiveness may be increased?

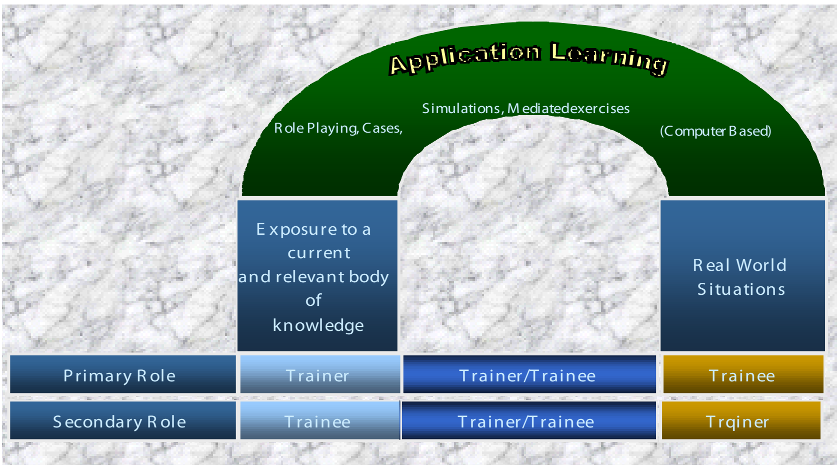
The Application Bridge Explanation

The "Application Bridge" concept can be used to improve the effectiveness of training in various situations. The underlying purpose is to explain—as fully as possible early in the training seminar—the roles and responsibilities of both the trainer and trainees (managers), thus avoiding the trainees' expectation of being spoon fed. It is helpful to explain the set of mutual responsibilities by utilizing the Application Bridge concept. This concept can be visually depicted as shown in Figure 1.

Training and the Trainer's Role

The objective of training is to achieve a change in the behavior of the trainees through the acquisition of skills, technical knowledge, specific problem-solving abilities, or attitudes (Whetten & Cameron, 2007). The box to the left in Figure 1, labeled "Exposure to knowledge and skills," represents the trainer's responsibility in fulfilling this objective. Trainers are to provide exposure to the theory and research underlying a particular body of knowledge that is applicable to a group of managers' problems or needs. The trainer's primary role is to assist in the transfer from "learning" to "doing" by exposing the trainees to the body of knowledge and then showing the trainees how to apply the newly acquired knowledge to a class of problems or situations through examples, cases, checklists, and other aids (Saks & Belcourt, 2006).

Figure 1. Application Bridge Model



Training cannot fulfill its purpose if it does not expose participants to a state-of-the-art body of knowledge; without state-of-the-art knowledge, the trainer is not providing the best tools available to trainees. Also, if training does not provide exposure to a body of knowledge relevant to the class of problems, it is not meeting managers' needs for knowledge and skills that are transferable to the job. However, exposure to an up-to-date, relevant body of knowledge alone is not adequate; some clues about how the body of knowledge may be applied are also the trainer's responsibility. To the extent that training does not provide these clues through examples, checklists, cases, role playing, or other aids, it is derelict in fulfilling its obligation. If one of these three conditions (i.e., less than state-of-the-art knowledge, lack of relevance, and no demonstration of application) exists, then training has not fulfilled its role and is vulnerable to a charge that it is not useful in the "real world" and cannot be transferred to the job. However, if all three of these conditions are present, training and the trainer have fulfilled the role of training.

Trainee's Role

The manager/trainee's objective is to apply newly acquired knowledge and skills to the job in such a way as to aid the company in achieving its goals and objectives. To meet this objective, the trainee must take the general principles and guides provided via training and mentally integrate the principles and guides with the situation(s) on the job. In other words, the trainee must be proactively collaborating with the trainer to construct an "application bridge" which connects training's "exposure to knowledge and skills" box on the left to the "real world situations" or on-the-job box on the right (see Figure 1). The best designed training program will be a failure if the application bridge is not constructed. Since construction of the application bridge is a mental or intellectual activity, the responsibility for its completion rests solely with the trainees—no one else can do it for them. If the trainees cannot find the training useful in the real world, it is, in all likelihood, because they have not put forth the necessary mental or intellectual effort to build the application bridge. Of course, the trainer is a source of support and clarification throughout the training session; this facilitates the trainee's crossing of the application bridge.

Why do trainees/participants resist putting forth the necessary mental effort to build the application bridge? Given that the company has made a substantial financial investment in the training and trainees have a personal investment of time and attention, it would seem that the positive outcome would be worth the mental effort necessary on the part of the trainee. After all, the training is designed to benefit all parties concerned: the trainees by enabling them to perform more effectively, increasing their probability of being promoted; and the company by more effectively accomplishing its objectives.

Based on anecdotal experiences from the authors' training activities, there appear to be at least two major reasons for managers/trainees' failure to build the application bridge. First, the kind of mental or intellectual effort required to construct the application bridge is strenuous and perplexing. To construct the application bridge requires extensive analysis of the situation to determine where the general principles from training have

application, making the general principles specific, trying a new alternative, evaluating the success of the new alternative, and recycling through the thinking process again. It is little wonder that trainees are unwilling to expend the effort required to try the unknown, given the tendency to be comfortable with the known (Lewin, 1951). Second, the job pressure to "get the work out" makes it difficult, at best, to find time to do the thinking required to construct the application bridge, especially if the trainee/participant is not encouraged to do so by his or her superior. The trainee must be provided with a climate that is supportive of creative thinking and risk taking necessary to build the application bridge. Given the tendency to be comfortable with the known, to seek the way of least resistance, and to experience daily job pressures as well as the absence of a climate conducive to risk taking, it is small wonder that failure to build the application bridge is a common occurrence.

Application of Theory

Returning to the initial complaint heard as trainees leave seminar sessions, "it was good, but it contained too much theory," the training professional must hold firm in the knowledge of the necessity of theory in training. As most effective trainers know, a well-designed training seminar must contain some theory. Managerial techniques are, in fact, applications of theory. Therefore, if a manager is to fully understand a technique, and more importantly, to use it effectively, a familiarity with the theoretical foundation is necessary (Porras & Anderson, 1981). For example, in training to determine and correct the causes of poor performance, one technique is to ask: "Does the employee have strong motives that are frustrated at work?" The manager cannot apply this technique if he/she does not know something about why people work and what they expect from their work environments. This means that if the training is to be applied, the manager must be exposed to the theory of motivation, even though the manager may dislike theory, especially motivation theory. This is one reason that management training must include at least some minimum amount of theory to make it useful.

Another reason that some theory must serve as the basis for developing the content of management training is to prevent inappropriate application of management techniques. Inappropriate implementation of managerial techniques can result in increased costs for the company and a resulting loss of confidence in the training. If a training session concentrated on explaining only motivational techniques and not the corresponding theoretical foundation of the techniques, the techniques might be applied in the wrong situation. For example, if only the motivational techniques that emphasize permitting employees to provide their own (1.) direction, (2.) objectives, (3.) operating budget, (4.) reporting system, and (5.) structure is explained, the manager might be inclined to attempt to apply this motivational technique to all employees when all employees are not interested in that level of autonomy. For those knowledgeable about motivation theories and techniques (e.g., Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Herzberg, 1968), a moment of reflection reveals that there is a very good chance that this would be disastrous as this technique cannot be applied to all people. The theory and research from which the above motivational techniques were developed indicate that these techniques work best with

intrinsically motivated or self-motivated employees who are highly educated, trained specialists, who are accustomed to managing their own time (Kerr & Jermier, 1978) and who often perform highly creative tasks that are so innovative as to be impossible to structure . It is easy to see that this theory does not apply to everyone; however, it does apply to certain types of jobs and people in those jobs—those calling for creativity and innovation. Therefore, the technique is appropriate in a laboratory situation, but it is certainly not appropriate in highly-structured, machine-paced situations, e.g., a production line. If the theoretical foundation for the technique is explained, then misapplication of the technique is less likely to occur. This is the second reason that any managerial training must incorporate at least a minimum amount of theory if training is to be useful.

More Than One Way To Skin A Cat or What Happens When Techniques Become Obsolete

Since techniques are ways of applying theory, it stands to reason that several techniques may be utilized to apply any one body of theory. It also stands to reason that different techniques with various degrees of success may be developed and discarded while the body of theory remains unchanged. Techniques, then, tend to come and go very fast while the body of theory changes very slowly. Managers who receive training in techniques only may become obsolete overnight as new techniques are developed. Since management training is expensive, the company does not want this to occur. One way to avoid training obsolescence is to provide some theory in training because theory tends to evolve while techniques tend to change in an abrupt revolutionary way. Training based on theory and research has a longer shelf-life than training based only on techniques.

If the manager has some familiarity with the body of theory, he/she will be able to stay abreast of new research resulting in new and updated applications of the theory. As the theory-building progresses in the field, new techniques are likely to be reported at luncheons, management club meetings, company publications, business publications, or through informal discussion with fellow academics, consultants, trainers, and managers. The important point is that training-in-techniques-only will result in the manager's knowledge becoming obsolete when a new technique is developed. However, if the manager is familiar with the theory, he/she may discard the old technique and apply the new one immediately and continue to function as an effective manager.

In Sum

In summary, one of the sources of disagreement over the role and nature of training stems from a failure of the trainee to understand that a strenuous mental and intellectual effort is required throughout the training process. To the extent that the manager/trainee expects to be "spoon-fed" by training, it is unlikely that the training will be effective. Trainees should know that they are expected to put forth mental and intellectual effort; furthermore, a useful device for conveying this expectation is the "Application Bridge." If the trainer has provided exposure to a current, appropriate body of knowledge along with examples, checklists, cases or other application aids, then he/she has fulfilled the expectations of the trainer's role in the training process. Before the trainee labels the

training "not useful in the real world," he/she should ask him- or herself "have I put forth sufficient mental or intellectual effort to build the application bridge?"

Three reasons have been presented as to why training should not consist totally of application techniques—and no theory. The first reason is that techniques are ways of applying theory; if maximum benefit is to be gained from the techniques, something must be understood about the theory that is being operationalized via the techniques. The second reason is that if the theory that the technique is to apply is not understood, the technique may be inappropriately applied, resulting in poor performance, increased costs, and loss of confidence in training. The third and final reason is that techniques may change overnight, leaving the manager obsolete while theory evolves very slowly and permits managers to stay current in their fields.

In conclusion, trainees need to understand why their next training seminar contains some theory, even though they may consider the theory "boring." It is for the trainees' benefit that the trainer presents that boring stuff called "theory" and that the application bridge is there to be crossed over.

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